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# CRITICAL READING AND TODAY'S ADOLESCENT

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Of all of the areas of reading skill development, the component of critical reading may well be one of the most neglected on the part of both students and teachers. Most reading authorities agree that emphasis on critical reading should begin as early as the primary grades. There are many opportunities for primary and intermediate children to respond to questions and situations which call for high level evaluative answers. The key to effective development of critical reading appears to be centered around the teacher's attitudes and what she or he demands of students with regard to concept retention. If the instructor requires the memory of isolated facts apart from honest inquiry, the pupil will be ill equipped in giving divergent responses when requested.

All teachers at the secondary level must understand that they have many opportunities to enlarge the critical skill levels of all students. The areas of science and social studies lend themselves especially well to the direct, planned teaching of these competencies. The field of journalism with study of the formation of advertisements presents a chance for the instructor to discuss the nature and use of various propaganda techniques such as band wagon, card stacking, identification with prestige, and name calling.

The purposes of this article are to explain the nature and kinds of prerequisites involved in learning critical reading skills and describe some classroom lessons and activities which can be employed to build these abilities with all kinds of students. Each lesson described will need some slight adaptation to fit the exact requirements of a given classroom and/or teacher.

## *Prerequisites for Effective Critical Reading*

Some students can process, understand, and develop critical reading skills in a satisfactory manner, while others cannot. There are numerous conditions or prerequisites which must be present if the effective learning of these skills is to take place.

*First*, the reader must be as free from bias and prejudice as possible. While the classroom content teacher probably cannot deal directly with this facet, a frank discussion of this factor and how it influences one's critical thinking skills may be appropriate. Unfortunately, many persons who have relatively high levels of intelligence are hampered by bias and thus cannot read critically concerning certain sensitive issues.

*Second*, all learners must understand that what they read in newspapers and magazines *may* or *may not* be factual in nature.<sup>1, 2</sup> They must decide if the stated conclusions and implications are based on actual facts or if they

are merely the opinions of the writer. This factor can be evaluated by asking each student to read a two- or three-paragraph passage about a topic which is relevant to the content area being studied. A short comprehension test can be administered which contains questions similar to the following:

1. Council Bluffs is the capital of Iowa.
2. The last state to be admitted to the Union was Hawaii.
3. Wisconsin has better climate than Missouri.
4. The leading cause of cancer in males is obesity.
5. A yard equals thirty-six inches.

Other exercises such as the following may be employed to alert students to the different types of propaganda techniques.<sup>3</sup> (It is assumed that a series of appropriate orientation lessons have been conducted with respect to the techniques.)

Each of the following statements illustrates a kind or type of propaganda technique. Write the name of the technique on the blank to the left of the statement.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Things go better with Betterdrink soda.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. All politicians are dishonest.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I know all farmers will vote for me because I was born and raised on a farm.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. John Denver prefers Neato guitars over all other brands.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Senator John Blowall is an ultra-conservative.

Following the use of the above essay, the instructor could distribute a supply of popular magazines and newspapers and ask students to find examples of six propaganda techniques. Encourage the readers to find as many *different* kinds of techniques as possible.

*Third*, some knowledge must be gained relative to the general level of intelligence of each of the learners since there is a high degree of correlation between comprehension (especially critical reading skills) and mental age. Students who have limited levels of intelligence will encounter much difficulty with regard to the concept loads of more technical types of critical and creative reading. Reading activities which demand these kinds of skill development should not be emphasized with students of limited mental capacities.

*Fourth*, each student must be able to assess the relative value of any printed material by mentally asking the following questions:

1. Who wrote the material and are the writers really qualified to write on this topic? (Reading educators have long since known that many persons without any academic training have written articles in popular magazines about phonics and other methods.)
2. When and why was the material written?
3. How does the philosophy of this writer compare with the ideas promoted by other writers on this subject?
4. Does the writer use propaganda techniques and generalized statements (without research data) to promote his or her point of view?

*Techniques for Improving Critical Reading Skills  
of Secondary Students*

The maximum development of a high level of skill development in critical reading does not come naturally or by chance. Each secondary teacher in each content area must be alert to opportunities which will serve to enhance the capabilities of each student in this area. The following lesson suggestions may be of help to teachers in fulfilling this goal. These ideas should be especially helpful in the areas of social studies, science, and literature.

1. Establish a vertical file in your classroom for collecting newspaper and magazine articles on controversial subjects. Further division may be made into "pro" and "con" categories.
2. Provide students with the names and addresses of senators, congressmen, legislators, mayors, and other officials. Encourage students to write to these persons regarding their views on certain topics and issues. Encourage them to compare this data with other information from other sources.
3. Ask the director of the school media center to establish a designated section of the center where controversial subjects can be studied and where such items as books, tapes, filmstrips, films, videotapes, and other materials can be stored and used. To establish closure on any subject, the student must have input from a number of sources.
4. Invite community leaders who represent divergent viewpoints to speak to your class. Train your students to be well prepared for the presentation by having them study opposing viewpoints from different materials during the time period immediately preceding the presentation. Encourage them to ask questions of the speaker which will cause him or her to defend his or her point of view.
5. With the help of the school debate coach, a debate between two more able debaters could take place, which involves a controversial issue relevant to a given content area. In the area of social studies, the topic may be "Why the Senate Should Ratify the Panama Canal Treaties."

At the close of the debate a discussion could take place relative to the facts and opinions which each speaker gave. Establish which speaker used the best documentation for his or her position.

*Summary*

Of all the comprehension skills, the development of effective critical reading skills may be one of the most important goals of both student and teacher. These skills cannot be left to chance and must be taught directly by every content teacher through the use of the many activities which have been described in this article. The printed word is a powerful tool, and we educators must insist that our learners understand it both literally and critically.

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